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Frank Terpil: a profile that will scare you

Have you ever wondered if you really know what is going on in the world?

If you haven't, you will after watching an extraordinary, startling, chilling documentary on public television tonight.

Most TV documentaries tend to be clinical, if worthy, attempts to bring public attention to an important topic. This one is not like that. It packs a punch that will floor any citizen of this free country who feels reasonably confident that he knows what his government is up to.

The show is called "Frank Terpil: Confessions of a Dangerous Man." (Channels 22 and 67 at 10 p.m.) It's about terrorism, arms sales, murder, torture and corruption. That ought to be enough to get your attention.

For some reason, this story has been drifting around the edges of the media for months, with various aspects of it coming to light, but no real spark setting off what should be some form of outrage, a demand to get to the bottom of a situation full of potential implications for the best interests of the nation.

It's a spy story of the sort that would sell millions of paperback books to readers who'd be diverted but never once convinced such wild circumstances were possible in reality.

The fact that it is real, or some of it is, or somebody is even saying it is, is enough to make anyone believe any preposterous plot some inventive mind could conjure up.

You may have heard of Frank Terpil. His name has been cropping up of late in the few stories about this explosive subject that have appeared so far. Most prominently, he was interviewed by a very coy Mike Wallace on "60 Minutes" two months ago.

This documentary makes that Wallace interview look like the thin icing on a 30-layer cake.

Terpil is—or was—an international arms merchant. (One of the pieces of this story is the sudden unexplained disappearance of Terpil shortly after this interview and the one on "60 Minutes.") As an arms merchant, he finally came to the attention of the press. Before that he was a CIA agent, close pal of Uganda's Idi Amin, employee of Libyan leader Muammar el Kadafi, and prime player in a shady world of international political hijinks of the kind that supposedly only exist in James Bond novels.

Terpil was caught in a well-set up undercover deal by a couple of New York City cops posing as terrorists in the market for guns. He was later busted in Washington as well. He was set up to take a long fall, 53 years to be exact; but a judge disagreed with prosecutors and set bail for Terpil and his partner, Gary Korcala. (He was also on "60 Minutes.")

Terpil then skipped the country. In hopes of telling his side of the story—or for some other reason we can only guess at—Terpil sent word through intermediaries to Jim Hougan, whom Terpil had met in conjunction with Hougan's book about use of intelligence agents in private industry: "Spooks."

Bill
Carter



Hougan contacted the executive producer of the PBS documentary series "World," David Fanning, and Fanning and director Anthony Thomas (of "Death of a Princess" fame) went to Damascus, Syria, to meet with Terpil.

Subsequently they brought a camera crew to film Terpil in his exile of Beirut. There he told his extraordinary tale of doing business with some of the world's most famous villains, with apparent impunity, thanks to his past connections in the intelligence community—and the continuing assent of that community, at least in some cases.

There is much to question in Terpil's motives; I wouldn't believe this man if he told me the sun was going to rise tomorrow. The documentary includes a section of self-examination in which the reporter presents frankly the possibility that he is being used. But there is no discounting the impact of what Terpil says, the need to find out just how much if it is true.

After the interview, the producers went back and pieced together a more complete story of Terpil's life and activities.

The result is one of the most absorbing and disturbing documentaries ever presented on television. Despite some silly flaws (such as trying to

go into Terpil's personal past, his psyche, his roots in Brooklyn to find the reasons for his choice of this particular career), the film is a remarkably revealing portrait of the "business" of international terrorism.

Terpil is really only a bit player, and the focus on him may be slightly misplaced. The film really only comes alive in its second half when it starts to get down into the implications of Terpil's activities.

For example, the current situation in Libya certainly takes on a different color if you consider the import of Terpil's work (and that of his close associate Ed Wilson, now considered a fugitive) for Colonel Kadafi.

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Headlines last month screamed of a possible hit squad from Libya descending on the United States. But his film presents evidence that Kadhafi's regime has been supported, trained, propped up and all but sanctioned by the CIA.

There are too many such questions raised by the show to go into here. It is enough to say this show is extremely unsettling, should be seen and should be followed up, by some of the more affluent and prestigious news organizations those with resources PBS can't touch.

They haven't yet begun to explore what seems to be unfathomed depths in this story of collusion between what we've always thought of as "us" and "them."